

CLAUDIA. By HENRY NORMANBY.

The story of a lady's adventures in search of a husband and her failure to achieve her object in spite of possessing many of the attributes that usually ensure success.

I.

TO me was allotted the rôle of sightseer. I thought from the first that I should take no part in the little comedy about to be produced. Claudia, of course, was, as always, leading lady, but Noémi was decidedly the heroine. Dacent was at times the hero, without anything of the heroic; he was a hinge on which the whole plot depended. Mrs. Gurdon and the Welshman were supers, the former rather amateurish, but Apmaris excelling all the actors; the whole *dénouement* was due to him, and without his handsome presence the scene would have lacked a graceful adjunct.

I became interested in the whole thing at a fairly early stage; to pursue the necessary metaphor, I might say that I was present at the dress-rehearsal, for, before I met Dacent, Mrs. Gurdon had confided in me; in the heavy-parent style of very early Victorian drama, that he was to marry one of the dear girls. I gazed with increased interest on the dear girls. One might have gazed on Claudia for ever, so long as she were aware of the scrutiny. She lived to be gazed upon. It was extraordinary to see the girl pose. I have glanced at her through a window to find her absolutely ungainly, almost plain, and, being announced a minute later by the maid, I have found Claudia transformed, reclining gracefully with folded hands on pensively held chin, in a dim corner of the studio. She was a particularly beautiful girl; but when, in moments of carelessness, she dropped the mask of languor her radiant beauty seemed to fade. Her loveliness was a pose, and a very successful one. Moreover, her affection for her sister was simulated; in public she treated Noémi with wayward gentleness; when they were alone she ignored or bullied her. Noémi's necessary pose of sisterly affection, instead of elevating her to grace and interest, degraded her somewhat—it hampered her. Artist in all other matters, she lacked the power of self-abnegation requisite to such a part; hers it was to outshine Claudia in all things save in this and her beauty; she could not sort out the artist from the woman inside her. It may also have been that the adjustment of which Claudia was acknowledged master became, in comparison with Noémi's greater qualities, the most despicable triviality, so that what in one was a grace became in her sister a blemish.

It was evident that Dacent was a victim. Mrs. Gurdon had decoyed

him, and now waited for the girls to play and land him. If you had met Noémi in the street you would have known from the set of her hair that she would die rather than "encourage" any man on earth. Whereas a single glance at Claudia's bepuffed and ornate coiffure would have as decidedly proved that her second mission in life was to annex some fellow-man. Claudia it was, then, who chose to play him, and the wonder was that he consented to be played.

At first it was my part to speculate, next to smile, and then to be unfeignedly sorry while he submitted, with apparent ill-grace, to the blandishments and wayward fancy of the fair angler. Before him, her chosen, she never dropped the mask. He could see what a very lovely girl she was physically, and it is not improbable that he believed her to be accomplished. She was the kind of girl from whom you expect accomplishments, but she had not acquired even the art of piano-playing. True, she could do more with her eyes than any other creature I have ever seen; they acted independently of her face. Noémi's eyes, needless to say, did not work alone. Her mouth sulked or gravely smiled in unison with steel-grey eyes that lacked lustre. I remarked on only one occasion that her eyes were really fine—when the ground was covered with snow. And snow was the last thing you would think of in connexion with Noémi; she was so intensely human, so vibrant, that the very soul of her must have been flesh-coloured, a warm, living tint that would put the dead-white snow to shame.

Yet Noémi also lacked accomplishments. She could paint only—how she could paint! Not the china-teacup style nor the heavily shaded wild-rose kind of art; she painted landscapes that glowed on the canvas, and men and women that might have lived, so great the longing in their faces. Noémi had been taught to paint and to draw, but hers was the kind of talent that is balked by instruction, not encouraged. Strange girl! She accepted teaching from no one on any point. Even her manners were her own; she had evoked a code of morals without help of laity or clergy, and if the dicta of the greater moralists happened to coincide with hers, so much the better for the greater moralists; she was not dependent on them. Her speech was decided even to brusqueness and her discrimination imperfect.

In Claudia such tastes would have been allowed, encouraged; but Noémi's soul should have been boundless; it must have been her parentage—the curse, most unjust, working to the unsinching generations—her miserable parentage and surroundings that had set limitations to her genius. Mrs. Gurdon and Claudia had warped her.

Apmaris and I saw, very early in the play, that unless Dacent took to his heels at once he was lost. But it was not ours to advise. As Apmaris put it, we were in the stalls for the time being; we couldn't behave like the rustic in the pit, crying rabid warnings to the unsuspecting hero. Mrs. Gurdon, from her standpoint, also saw that the man's hesitation meant gain for Claudia.

"I never advise the dear girls," she said; "they're both—what d'you call it?—free agents."

I hadn't the courage to suggest that Dacent wasn't.

"He's well off, I expect," I remarked.

"Not what you'd call a *parti*," said she, "but a thousand or so." I looked at him with increased interest, wondering why the man didn't at once leave for Morocco or the Urals.

Mrs. Gurdon rolled the words round her tongue. As she herself admitted, a thousand or so wasn't much; but, then, where there was *true* love . . .

I roused myself sufficiently to say "Of course" and to go. I had been staring blankly at the victim, in truth quite amazed that anyone should be taken in by Claudia's affected manners. Noémi's close hand-grip as I said good-bye surprised me, her face still more; the girl was absolutely radiant, and I didn't forget her joyous smile for a long while.

II.

Some days passed before I had time to call again at the Gurdons', but by chance I met Apmaris, who was greatly elated at the turn things had taken.

"*De plus*, Noémi's always so pleased and pleasing nowadays," he told me; "altogether the whole thing's going on beautifully. Of course you know the plot, but you mustn't miss the acting. Act II. is about to commence. Don't miss a word of it, man!"

I went round that evening, most opportunely. There was a *soirée*, as Claudia said; the poor relations called it a *conversazione*, and Mrs. Gurdon had been heard to designate such entertainments by the name of "Small and Earlies." Fortunately it was small, but not so very early. Indeed, it was past midnight when we flocked into the studio to see Noémi's work. The girl was always somewhat reserved about her art, but on that memorable occasion she smilingly and aptly expatiated on her subjects, told us amusing tales of the people who "sat" for her, explained, at my request, her idea for her coming picture. It was clear to us who knew of her ability and who now saw the fruits of her toil that the girl was sure to succeed. It was an hour of triumph for her; frankly expressed as were our praises, her manner of accepting of them was no less frank but decidedly more graceful. Noémi became, for the moment, quite wonderfully handsome, and I am sure that the others, as much as I, forgot that there was ever a Claudia.

The second act culminated in a magnificent "curtain." When we returned to the drawing-room Dacent left immediately; he was pale, distraught, and hurried; he lingered pitifully in front of Noémi as he made his adieux, but she dismissed him brusquely, yet kindly withal, and he crept away.

We followed some time later, and were walking along the deserted street when someone called to us. Along the greasy pavement, and across the muddy roadway, ran Noémi, still clad only in her light house-dress, with draggled flimsy skirt and ruined slippers. In silence and amazement we turned; Apmaris gently took her hand under his arm and led her towards the house again.

She broke the awkward silence as we splashed across the street. "They've run away!" she panted. "Oh, oh, oh, they've run away!"

We stared at each other across her bowed head.

"They've run away!" she sobbed, becoming every moment more hysterical.

Mrs. Gurdon's grief was somewhat marred by her evident sense of triumph. The machinations of herself and Claudia had met with success. Still, for the suddenness of the business and the unseemly hour, she made a very creditable attempt to act up to her rôle. Her insane suggestion, that she harped upon continually, was that one of us—Apmaris for choice—should take Noémi immediately to Dacent's rooms for the purpose of reclaiming the runaway. But Noémi, calmed and flushed, indignantly refused to stir or to let us go, as we half-heartedly suggested. Since her first transport of surprise and shame the girl had returned to her usual calm, restrained aloofness, almost indifference, save for her pout and close-drawn brows. Now she once more flared up, derided her mother openly, and frowned Apmaris into silence. She would not hear of any interference; she and Claudia had little in common, no sympathy, no love; why, therefore, asked Noémi, should one attempt to save the other from a natural folly? Or why interfere between a girl and her happiness?

We saw that we could do no more, and again left to go homeward. We were quite bewildered by the turn things had taken. That he should run away with her! It was so unnecessary that it became quite unromantic. As Apmaris solved it, she had run away with him, and it really seemed the more likely. She must have become very desperate, but when a girl is twenty-seven it doesn't take long for her to become either sensible or desperate.

In spite of what we said to the loud-lamenting mother that these hasty runaway affairs always turned out happily, I must confess to feeling very sorry for Dacent. The memory of his awkward adieux, his wistful, distracted glances at Noémi, clung to me through the night.

iii.

It seemed fitting that the next scene should take place in my rooms. Dacent had arrived before I was up. I heard him moving restlessly about in the adjoining room while I hurriedly dressed. When I went in to him he did not greet me. He was haggard and spent.

"I've had the most awful experience that ever man had," he began bluntly. "Look here!" he said, flushing hotly, and handing me a note; "last night I received that."

I returned it in silence and he replaced it with care in his pocket-book.

"I tried to see her after that," he went on, "but when we got out of the studio she wasn't there. I didn't dare tell Noémi, and as for you chaps . . ."

I replied indignantly.

"I was half-crazed," he said, in extenuation. "I really was half-mad; *she* must have been quite mad! What would you have done?"

"What did *you* do is more to the point?"

"She said she'd be there before me," he continued. "So—so I didn't go to my flat."

"Didn't go?"

"No . . . no. I've been walking about all night between Eversostreet and her own home to see when she'd sicken of it and go back. Now I daren't go to see *them*, because they mayn't have found out, and I'm certainly not going to my flat until she's cleared off."

"They have found out," I said.

His face fell. "They have, have they? How do you know?"

"They called us back last night."

"They?"

"Well, Noémi," I admitted.

"Ah, Noémi!" he repeated, as if the name was a novelty. "Was she much upset?"

"She was terribly cut up," I said. "She was quite ill."

At this the man grew very grey and walked about the room again. I told him all—of the mother's wish and Noémi's angry refusal, and as I recounted what she had said his face became ashen. He went speechless from my room when I had finished.

I had thought at times during the *tête-à-tête* that I should derive much amusement from his attitude when he went, but I felt depressed and somewhat hopeless.

When Noémi came, not like the ladies of West End drama, but unveiled, on foot, and undisguised, I was not wholly surprised. The situation was distinctly more promising. She also began straightway, and my mind whirled.

"I came to you," she said, as if I had asked, "to you because you were very calm and rather aloof last night, and John Apmaris is always biassed in my favour. Now you and I like each other just enough, and you must listen with an open mind." She stood now with her back to me and looked through the window. "I was distracted, upset, last night," she said. "Her note was the first intimation we had of the whole affair, although, of course, anyone could see that both she and mother wanted to make a match between them. But we never guessed *that* would happen—I never guessed. Now, mother says there's only one thing to do, and she's really quite glad that it's come about so, I believe—you saw that, too, didn't you? Now, it's *this* I've come to say. He mustn't marry her; I know it sounds terrific. You'll think it worse when you hear why. You would never guess my motive. . . ."

And with that she turned and looked at me. "Do you yourself think," she questioned slowly, "that it was *his* plan?"

"No."

"No," she said after me, and returned to the window. "He always seemed a very nice man. We liked him, trusted him. If I had behaved as you and Mr. Apmaris expected, I should have been entirely calm, rather indifferent and not ashamed at all of her. You always thought me very broad-minded, enormously so for a woman of my position. You found me at first absolutely shocked and prudish, overwrought, hysterical.

When you two kind men had gone the second time, I went to my room and unpacked my travelling bag." She faced round. "I was going away to-day. Tell me, truthfully, do you believe it was *her* doing, not his?"

I felt that I must tell her; we each knew more than the other. I for one would divulge my knowledge.

"He knew nothing of it," I said, meeting her steady eyes. "He never even guessed."

She came towards me, silent, and I spoke further.

"He was here just before you came; he told me his version, his defence. He hasn't been near his flat since he got her insane note."

When next I looked at her she was flushed and tearful. With a brave smile, she held out her hand.

"You are good to tell me," she said, with a sob in her throat. "This morning we were to have met and been married at half-past eleven."

The shock of her announcement left me saying baldly, "There's still time." Mechanically I led her out, hailed a cab, and drove to the corner of her road. I got out tremulously enough, and went to the house.

Mrs. Gurdon had just gone up to put on a hat and cloak preparatory to driving with Dacent to the flat. He told me with downcast looks and sullen tone that the lady had disbelieved every word he said, had abused him maternally, and was going to insist on his marrying Claudia. By the time I had heard all this I had got him down the steps and round the corner into the cab. Then I flew to Apmaris, and by dint of bribes and threats we arrived at the Registrar's office in time for part of the ceremony.

When we came out of the office, Apmaris and Mrs. Dacent spoke apart. My idea burnt in me.

"Dacent," I said, "yours it is to save your sister-in-law alive."

Apmaris was splendid. "I can't think why I haven't been consulted," he protested. "You must know, Mrs. Dacent, that this fellow dragged me here without my knowing a bit where we were going! And if you only would leave things to me! Miss Claudia's not in the flat, she's at home in her own room with the *migraine*. Last night after we'd left you, Miss Noémi, I went off at once to Dacent's place to talk him over. I knew you were terrifically worried. And there was she, very angry about his not turning up. Then I told her that he'd not received the note, that I'd had it—and it was a good shot—I saw that she *had* given or sent him a note. I talked her over, told her that if she went back then, under my care, no one, not even Dacent, should know. She came like a lamb. I broke the latch of the studio-window, and helped her in. That's my business!"

In less than half an hour's time we had all casually dropped in at the Gurdons'. Mrs. Gurdon was indisposed, poor woman; I believe she thought she was becoming demented, and that she had in her own brain muddled the events of the past evening horribly. Claudia, pale but lovely, avoiding Dacent and John Apmaris, devoted her fair self to me. Mrs. Dacent packed her bag again, and I saw them off by the boat-train.

Apmaris was still more splendid; he took Mrs. Gurdon and Claudia to the theatre that night. But the curtain really fell when Noémi kissed her sister good-bye.